

□ FLOOR SPEECH

05/04/2011

Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez

Mr. Speaker, last weekend I had the honor of participating in a remarkable event in the mountain town of Adjuntas, Puerto Rico. There, thousands braved a torrential downpour to demonstrate against a proposed natural gas pipeline that the current ruling party in Puerto Rico is threatening to build across the mountains and rainforests of the Island.

While I was there I met with Rosanna López León, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico's Ombudsman for the Elderly. As ombudswoman, she has unusual latitude for a public servant in the current government to speak the truth about what she hears and sees from senior citizens on the Island. Her term is 14 years, longer than the Governor's, and the money for her office comes mainly from the federal government through the Older Americans Act, so she is incorruptible, unassailable and untouchable.

She presented me with a series of letters she wrote to Attorney General Eric Holder, to the U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other federal and Puerto Rican officials. They are based on sworn affidavits from senior citizens residing in four towns in the path of the proposed pipeline, describing how local seniors, are being pressured and intimidated into signing over their property for the pipeline's supposed and unapproved right-of-way.

Ms. López León believes that "repetitive violations to the Older Americans Act have become a danger to the lives, health, rights, and property of the elderly population..."

She also describes "illegal trespassing into properties of the elderly under false pretext of measuring a non-existing right of way, illegal trespassing into the homes of the elderly with fraudulent pretenses to generate a written authorization from the elderly to allow and permit a

consented purchase of their property to the Commonwealth and the [energy company] well below market value for the property, without granting the elderly the opportunity to seek counsel, a recent appraisal...or to contest the eminent domain procedure which they are threatened with if they do not grant a "voluntary" consent to sell the properties."

These 41 affidavits are from residents from four towns on the route of the proposed gas pipeline: Adjuntas, Peñuelas, Utuado and Toa Baja and they all tell a repeated and chilling story. I have translated a few of them and would like to read short excerpts.

These affidavits come from women like Antonia Santiago Cabrera, 69 of Adjuntas, Puerto Rico, who is in this picture. She said:

"The helicopters of PREPA [the energy company] constantly fly over my residence and they do so at a low altitude, disturbing my tranquility. Since my home is built of wood and tin, when the helicopters hover, my entire house trembles. That has generated much anxiety in me, and for this reason I had to visit my primary doctor and I am now taking medication for my nerves and my heart condition has worsened."

Or Ms. Lucrecia Maldonado Rentas, who is 82 and is pictured here in front of her house with her sister Gloria. She says that "the letters I received were written to pretend to be a study to be conducted on the needs of the population and it ended up being one about natural gas, the pipeline and the expropriation process of the Barrio Portugués Community in Adjuntas. In them the process of expropriation is presented, but it is not explained and I do not understand it."

Then there is Mr. Luis Guzmán. We don't have his picture but he is a 67 year-old married farmer. Although he has been harassed since last year, Mr. Guzmán, who does not know how to read and can barely write, does not need to be fully educated to know the difference between right and wrong. If only choosing between right and wrong would come that easy to the ruling party.

I ask unanimous consent to have these affidavits put into the record.

You know, I want to make it clear to you Mr. Speaker and to this body and to the Attorney General, that these are not powerful or wealthy men and women. They are not legal scholars or real estate experts. They have made simple pleas to the court that their complaints are heard.

They are worried that they will lose the homes they own and the crops that sustain them because of laws and legal maneuvers they do not understand. They are U.S. citizens that need our help.

I plan to post all of the affidavits I have received alongside the hundreds of pages I have already received from federal agencies under the Freedom of Information Act on my website.

The more light that is shined on this project the more it reflects back a dark story of secrets, strong-arming, and short-cuts. I plan to continue shining my light and making as much information as public as possible so that the voice of the people of Puerto Rico is heard.

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 [Letter to Attorney General Eric Holder](#)